

VZCZCXRO8855
RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN
RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHTI #0414/01 1541336
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 021336Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7138
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000414

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE
DEPT OF JUSTICE FOR OPDAT, ICITAP

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AL](#)

SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, MAY 24-30, 2008: THE MEDIA ISSUE

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania. With the death of one of Albania's most powerful media moguls, this week's issue focuses on the media.

MEDIA DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) ALBANIAN MEDIA PIONEER DIES: Dritan Hoxha (no relation to former dictator Enver Hoxha), 39, father of three daughters and a son, died in a car accident in downtown Tirana, crashing his red Ferrari into a tree in the early morning hours of May 23. Hoxha was President of the Top Media Group, which includes the popular Top Channel Television and large shares in Top Albania Radio, digital terrestrial TV platform Digitalb, and the print daily "Shqip."

14. (U) Hoxha graduated from Tirana's Technical School and attended university first for engineering then briefly for medicine. Already an entrepreneur at heart, he recollected later what he thought then: "There is too little, too slow coming here. Gotta go!" He headed to Italy, working in a video game factory, returning to Tirana to open a video game hall at the age of 24. He moved into the coffee business in 1995 and by 1998 had captured about 20 percent of the Albanian coffee market with his Lori Cafe (named after his oldest daughter), in a country where, as the saying goes, "real business is done over coffee." With Lori Cafe as the goldmine, Hoxha began investing in the media, remaining loyal to his motto, "If you go in, you go in big and seek to be number one."

15. (U) FIRST, THERE WAS RADIO: Top Albania Radio, with the latest news at the hour, music off current western charts, and popular shows, was soon tuned in at bars, restaurants, and in taxi cabs. The station became popular as far as Corfu, Greece, because of the modern popular music. It continues to be the most popular station in Albania. Hoxha was careful enough to put antennas on the most difficult mountains of Albania's rugged terrain.

16. (U) THEN THERE HAD TO BE TV: In December 2001, Albanians began to tune to Top Channel for TV. To date, it remains the most popular in Albania, in Albanian-inhabited areas of Kosovo and Macedonia, and among Albanian emigrants abroad. Emigrants' condolence letters last week thanked Hoxha for teaching their children Albanian. The region's Albanian-majority political parties run campaign ads on Top Channel, including for the June 1 elections in Macedonia.

17. (U) According to a March 2008 poll by a USG-sponsored media trainer, Top Channel is the favorite station for 54 percent of Albanians, its news is the most accurate for 51 percent of Albanians, and 58 percent of Albanians rated it as excellent. (Ratings for the next best station are in the low 20s.) The station is correspondingly slick, imposing and attractive. Hoxha, who likened his station to CNN or Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi's stations, was always on top of things. One engineer said, "He's

crazy. If something doesn't function, he says 'buy a new one; don't waste time or money to fix it.'" He sought to hire the best journalists, reporters, cameramen, graphic designers, technicians, and sales people.

¶8. (U) The 600-force station produces some of the best and most popular programs. At the top is "Portokalli," (translation: Orange), a comparison to the amber street light, referring to Albania's exhaustingly slow pace of transition, neither red nor green. The weekly show ridicules Albania's problems and the elites who have not solved them. Phrases used in the show easily become part of the daily jargon among people of all ages. "Portokalli" is followed by the daily "Top Show," featuring discussions on anything on the minds of Albanians. Finally, "Fiks Fare," a satirical investigative show, is a cross between the U.S.' "60 Minutes" and "Candid Camera," using hidden cameras to capture public officials behaving badly or illegally, and highlighting problematic areas varying from education to water supply, health services to driver's licenses, and public tenders to electricity problems. During 2003-2004, when Albania's government opposition was historically weak, Albanians used to say, "The only opposition in this country is Fiks Fare." For the fifth year in a row, Top Channel organized Top Fest, a competition of young Albanian singers from Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo. For West-hungry youth, the glossy, modern technology, highly promoted competition is a major event, akin to "American Idol" in the U.S.

¶9. (U) A DIGITAL PIONEER: Digitalb was started in 2004 as a digital terrestrial platform, replacing analog technology, with 30 stations, half in Albanian. With decreasing copyright problems, Digitalb turned into a well of money, claiming it has 300,000 subscribers. The platform has several stations of movies (subtitled), Albanian and foreign music, news, science, and includes CNN and the BBC.

TIRANA 00000414 002 OF 002

Qneering continued with the introduction, through the Digitalb platform, of HD (high definition) TV, placing Albania at the top in Europe in this field, and with the 2006 introduction of a mobile phone carrying the TV signal, new technology which placed Albania behind only Japan and Italy.

¶10. (U) NO ANGEL: A young woman, 28-year old Entela Hysko, was in the crashed Ferrari with Hoxha, dying immediately when the car hit a tree and was cut in half. Police said the Ferrari was speeding at about 120 mph. Only a few pro-GOA outlets publicized the fact that there was a woman in the car. Hysko's mother said she worked at Top Channel, which remained silent on her death except to say that the girl never worked for Top Media. Hoxha had a passion for gambling, reportedly winning 600,000 euros in just one game. He later boasted of the win, saying he was proud to beat the previous record, supposedly held by former Prime Minister (and fellow notorious gambler) Fatos Nano. Rumors of involvement in criminal activity also dogged Hoxha, due to co-ownership of Top Albania Radio by former police officer and known organized crime figure Vajdin Lamaj. Lamaj was killed in 2005 when his apartment's elevator exploded in a mafia-style attack.

¶11. (U) Prime Minister Berisha, no fan of Hoxha's due to Top Media's generally critical reporting of his party (both recently and during Berisha's time in opposition), has been almost the only one to publicly highlight Hoxha's alleged criminal ties. When Top Channel called in 2005 for Albanians to vote against Berisha's Democratic Party (which nonetheless won, leading to Berisha's election as PM), relations between the Government and the station worsened. In June 2007, tax inspectors proposed a 12 million euro fine on Top Channel for tax evasion. The tax was neither collected nor lifted.

¶12. (U) THE FUNERAL AND THE DAY AFTER: Hoxha's funeral was widely attended by the Albanian public, public officials, and Top Media employees, who threw flowers on the passing coffin as the procession went through the streets of Tirana. A Kosovo government minister lauded Hoxha as a "missionary for Albanians everywhere," while others said he united Albanians virtually. In 2007, one MP considered the station "a national asset" for its willingness to stand up to the GOA.

¶13. (U) With no journalistic background, Hoxha was very TV savvy. As a result, Albanians today say the greatest contribution of Hoxha to Albania and its post-communism years has been "liberalization and opening up of the society." A commentator eulogized Hoxha as a "man of imagination and achievement, modernity and refined aesthetics, who through his media created an Albania to be loved, an Albania to have hopes for, and an Albania to take pride in." Despite his faults, this controversial visionary will be missed.

¶14. (U) BAD NEWS IN THE "NEWS": TVSH, Albania's public television station, is under new management with the firing of its former director earlier this month, Lutfi Dervishi. The station is not known for modern technology or streamlined staffing, and is seen as a journalistic mouthpiece of the Government. (Note: This is not the only game in town - Albania has dozens of TV stations that represent diverse points of view.) Under Dervishi, programming had notably shifted from completely GOA-focused to somewhat more balanced, a not unwelcome change for viewers, who responded positively to less coverage of government activities and more on issues such as the social and political fallout of the ammunition explosion at Gerdec on March 15. As audiences increased during Dervishi's term, he began to receive calls from GOA ministers complaining of unfavorable coverage. Dervishi's response: "News is realistic."

WITHERS